

## Children of the Night

Dawson stood over the edge of the canyon, watching the yellow sun starting its journey past the horizon into night. Or what passed for night on this world. The smaller companion sun was still overhead, bathing the desert in a lurid red glow.

How I live for site like these, he thought to himself. He had visited dozens of worlds in his lifetime, and no doubt he would see many more in the years to come. New systems were beings doubted and opened up every day. Far more than any current could hope to keep up with. That's why they would always be worker for independence like him.

He remembered an old-line from a poem, something he had heard as a boy. *Stars in my pocket, like grains of sand.* No, he would never lack for new worlds to see. Planets, moons, stars, they all came in abundance. It was people that were the rare commodity. More worlds than groups that want to settle them, he estimated. Nobody, he knew, would ever pay for the colonization rights for a harsh place like Daihon 116. There were planets far more hospitable out there, and settlers these days could afford the luxury of being choosy.

During high noon at this latitude, the intense heat drove most of the larger species into underground hibernation. But now that the local night was arriving, the brutal daytime temperatures would start to subside. It would get dark soon around here, now that night was coming, once the second sun had set. And Dawson knew what that meant.

*The planet's nighttime ecology will be coming out soon to feed,* he thought to himself, thinking about the reports he had scanned before taking this job.

He turned back towards the lander, where his partner was camped outside running a few more tests on the local soil.

"Hey Bakshi," Dawson called out towards the impromptu campsite that the two had set up under the lander's right wing, to shield them from the daytime suns.

"Checkout these readings," Bakshi squealed with excitement. His face was bent over into the eye piece of the field geology array. "I think we've got some very promising spectra, here."

"Pack everything up. We'll leave a couple of survey drones behind and monitor them from orbit. We'll pick up some more samples in the morning." Dawson's tone was unsympathetic, a dash of cold water on Bakshi's enthusiasm.

The younger man stared up from his instruments and looked at Dawson with dismay. Disappointment and anxiety were clearly visible on his face. It was a smooth, unblemished face, the kind that had never known hardship. It was quite a contrast to the

dark, leathery hide that the older man had acquired over the years under the harsh light of numerous alien suns.

"Ned, you can't be serious," Bakshi answered back. "We've got so much more data to collect. Do you really want to turn this over to the drones?"

"Not much choice, Omar" Dawson responded solemnly. "I don't want to spend the night fighting off a nightcrawler or a pack of sandwolves." Two other expeditions lost people to the local fauna. The Murasaki crew had twelve casualties when they first scouted this place for Daihon-Kerensky, Ltd. He had no intention of adding to that number.

To ecosystems thrived on Daihon 116, living in a precarious balance. The daytime fauna tended to be lethargic and sedentary, soaking up copious solar energy and occasionally feeding on other, more inactive species. But the nocturnal animal life was sharper, alert, had better senses, and lived within a brutal Darwinian competition for food in the energy-poor environment.

"But this soil is testing positive for ore residues," Bakshi implored. "If we could find a deposit of tantalum or fusion-group metals in this region, our bonus could triple! Hell, we could name our own price!"

That was typical of spacers like Bakshi, thought Dawson. So eager to find his grubstake, he thought like most greenhorns out here. They thought the stars were literally paved with riches. It was only when they reached Dawson's level of experience that they realized that the number of ways to die out here outnumbered the number of ways to get rich.

He shook his head in disappointment. He should have expected this from a frustrated academic like Omar Bakshi. He would have preferred someone with a few more years under his or her belt, someone like Tina Choy or Chick Levitt. He had done good work with them in the past. Unfortunately, he needed someone with a background in geology and he had to ship out fast if he was going to collect the full bonus that Daihon-Kerensky was offering. So he ended up picking a graduate student who had been recommended by a friend of a friend. Next time, he promised himself, he would only take on seasoned explorers that he or someone he trusted could vouch for personally. Until then, it was his responsibility to keep this stupid kid from ending up as lunchmeat.

"Omar, this isn't open for discussion. Pack it in and get on board. If there's valuable ore on this planet—which I highly doubt—then it will be here when we land back here in the morning."

"Look Ned, I'm not budging until I get some more hard data to work with. How else will I be able to program the drones? Without the right data to look for, they could miss any deposits entirely. Do you want me to waste an entire night's worth of work?"

In the balmy desert winds, Dawson's gaunt frame became more intimidating to Bakshi, his shadow cast in the red glow of the setting companion star, and the angry tone that had crept into his voice.

"It can wait until tomorrow," he said in a cool, even voice that threatened potential consequences. "Now get your crap together now, before..."

Dawson's threat was cut short by a distant ghoulish howl. The evening cry had enlivened the stillness of the desert's ruddy plains. The two men looked about to see what might be there. Soon enough, the first cry was answered by dozens more just like it, each seeming to be coming from a different direction around their position.

"What was that?" Bakshi asked nervously. Dawson knew the answer all too well. The older man looked across at the younger, trying to gauge in his mind how fast he could start a pre-flight checklist.

The children of the night had come out to feed.